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Let’s Write History: The Pale Horseman

This unit is designed to complement the study of Alfred, the Great and medieval history in students’ history classes. It provides a link between two disciplines, History and English; it allows for students to view that topic from different perspectives as they study it across two disciplines; it gives them the opportunity to engage with the topic through forms of creative writing and increases retention of the subject matter. According to Laminack and Wadsworth in *Learning Under the Influence of Language and Literature*, learners come to the classroom with varying degrees of background knowledge (2006). This is where the use of literature becomes essential as it can be used to bridge that gap. Books provide the background knowledge that learners need in smaller chunks. They support unfamiliar language and ideas with descriptions that enable the learner to visualize what they previously would not be able to imagine because of their limited background knowledge. It also provides them with the necessary vocabulary for discussion on that topic. Discussion leads to novel ideas and questions from students which lead to new levels of engagement and learning. By the end of this unit, students will have a better understanding of Alfred, the Great and the medieval era. They will also have an assortment of stories to help them understand and recall the history of the medieval era. The medieval era encompasses a wide duration of time and the reign of Alfred, the Great did not just occur within a vacuum. In this unit, the main text will be supported by additional literature that provide an encompassing look of the medieval era and the events which led up to the reign of Alfred.

In *Educational Psychology* by Eggen and Kauchak, it is stated that the background information that students have influences the interpretation and attention that they bring to the text (2001). During this unit students will gain a perspective that varies from that of a history class. They will focus on details which may be overlooked in the history class such as the clothes that were worn and the food that was eaten during that time to gain a sense of everyday life in the medieval era. Students will also explore ways to respond to this literature through forms of creative writing. In gaining a sense of the everyday life in the medieval era, students begin to build personal relationships with the subject matter. They will view these people as people who truly existed instead of people from a distant past and will compare their lives with the medieval life. They will be able to imagine themselves in the lives of these people. Students will also begin to make connections between the material taught in the history and English classes and will be able to see how one idea relates to the other or how the same idea can be viewed from different perspectives. The human brain works by classifying the information it receives. New material is either put into an existing category or a new category is created for it. Information which is related becomes linked together within the brain. When students study the same topic across two disciplines we are facilitating this function of the brain. They are now able to make connections between the new information that is learnt and link them to past information. The repeat of material reinforces the new information. The fact that the students are focusing on one topic increases the depth at which they think about that topic and the breadth of material covered. This coupled with the personal relationship formed with the subject matter will increase the retention of material.

This unit relays history in the form of a story because story form is more captivating, especially for students who do not enjoy history. The use of the story in this unit is important because it will be used to transmit cultural ideas and will help students retain the information better. Students will also engage in creating their own stories. In *the Power of Storytelling* by Mason, she states that students retain and understand information better when stories are incorporated into the lesson (1996). The students’ attention and interest are held longer; furthermore, when they create their own stories, they are more likely to share it with other people thereby increasing their retention of the story. Storytelling also employs the four whole-language functions of speaking, listening, writing and reading. The novel, *the Pale Horseman* makes the history of Alfred more memorable because students form a personal bond with what they are studying. The plot of the story acts like an organization tool by tying together the facts of history and clearly distinguishing the important points. The story also relays the traditional and cultural ideas of that time period; thus, acting as a socialization instrument.

Learners make sense of what is new through what they know. Alfred’s kingdom was the foundation of the British Empire and many ideas of the British Empire influenced the foundation of the United States. Therefore, for students to be able to make sense of the world they live in today they will trace back through time to Alfred and their origins. They will learn to analyze their world through comparisons to Alfred’s Kingdom on issues such as provision for the poor, education and government. Students will learn to make sound decisions by being analytical. The study of Alfred through *the Pale Horseman* will help students to understand Protestantism which has influenced the laws of America. They will become acquainted with the person of Alfred and the extent to which religion permeated his life thereby influencing the United States through the British Empire. Also through the study of the character of Alfred, they will also understand how and why Protestantism has affected the laws of the United States. Questions such as “Does the idea of church and state being separate really exist?”, “Why did the founding fathers insist on this separation?”, “How does the relationship of church and state today compare to Alfred’s time period?” and “How does our government of today compare to Alfred, the Great?” will be addressed within this unit. This type of questioning will train students to analyze other issues similarly. In this unit, students will also compare how social issues like provision for the poor and education were dealt with at that time as compared to now. Students will think critically on these issues which may drive them to become active in a social cause that is of importance to them. Students will learn about a culture, history and social issues through this unit.

Reference

Eggen, P. & Kauchak, D. (2001). *Educational Psychology: windows on a classroom.* Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Laminack, L. L. & Wadsworrth, R. M. (2006). *Learning under the influence of language and literature.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Mason, H. (1996). *The power of storytelling: a step-by-step guide to dramatic learning in K-12.* Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press.HHhhh